

## ***Tel-Aviv Mizrah*: The Potential of Iraqi Cultural Identity within Two Generations**

### **Abstract:**

Before immigrating to Israel, first-generation Iraqi Jews were deeply attached to their identity as Mizrahi Jews. Their mother tongue was Arabic and they had grown up in an oriental environment. Therefore, it was not easy for them to adopt the Euro-Israeli identity that the dominant Ashkenazi-European stratum in Israel compelled them to accept. Despite strong westernizing tendencies in Israeli society, the first generation of Iraqi Jewish immigrants maintained strong links to the Iraqi customs and traditions they had acquired in Iraq, particularly with regard to the musical folklore and oriental cuisine. On the other hand, second-generation Iraqi Jews were more familiar with Israeli society than their parents; they grew up in Israel and learned Hebrew in Israeli schools along with Ashkenazi Jews and other ethnic groups. This paper establishes connections between the historical realities of Iraqi Jewish immigrants and the literary representation of their world in the trilogy *Tel-Aviv Mizrah* (Tel-Aviv East) written in 2003 by the Iraqi Jewish author Shimon Ballas through a comparison of Ballas's literary vision with the historical realities of Iraqi Jewish identity in Israel over the course of two generations.

### **Key words:**

Mizrahim; Iraqi Jews; Shimon Ballas; Modern Hebrew Literature.

## Shimon Ballas: A Clash of Identities

“In most of my stories, there are topics based on characters that hold a dual identity. Even more, in most of my novels and stories you can find these characters that belong to two worlds, two cultures and two civilizations. These characters are very similar to me. The world of characters that belong to two worlds, two cultures and two civilizations is the world in which I live every day and into which I am trying to integrate myself little by little. I, or these dual identity characters, still keep the fragments left from the old identity as well as some memories from the past, which has not been entirely lost” (Hussein 2005).

This quotation evokes the dilemma of identity that reflects Iraqi Jewish author Shimon Ballas’s inner conflict between his Iraqi origins on the one hand and his encounter with a new land and the accompanying new language and new culture on the other. The quotation also helps to understand and explain the sociocultural background of many literary characters in Ballas’s works and the issues related to alternating between two worlds. Dual identity, alienation and nostalgia are the topics of this article, which tries to relate the world of the novel to the author’s reality. The paper also sheds light on the role of language and how it is connected to identity as seen in the experiences of two generations of Iraqi Jews in Israel. To understand how Shimon Ballas came to say the words above, it is necessary to first understand the social and cultural background in which he grew up.

Ballas was born on 6 March, 1930 (Kressel 1965, 254) into a small Iraqi Jewish family in Baghdad, where he grew up with two older brothers and a sister (Hever and Shinhav 2002, 298). Beginning early in his childhood, Ballas showed an interest in writing and he was particularly keen on writing down all the stories he heard at home (Alcalay 1996, 62–63). The first short story Ballas wrote while living in Baghdad was in Arabic: “*Alkatl alghamid*” (The Mysterious Murder). Unfortunately, this literary piece, among others, was burnt by Ballas just before he emigrated to Israel (Ballas 2005). Ballas was brought up in a middle class family that lived in the Christian quarter of Baghdad. Ballas studied at the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* school in Baghdad, which awakened dreams within him of studying in France. However, despite being included on the list of Iraqi students accepted by the Sorbonne for graduate studies, he did not go because at that same time, Ballas put his name on another list, that of the many Iraqi Jews who wanted to emigrate to Israel (Ballas 2009, 42).<sup>1</sup> After about 20 years, Ballas received his PhD from the Sorbonne, having gone to Paris from Israel (Alcalay 1996, 66–67). A childhood and adolescence in Iraq, immigration to Israel and the years of studying and living in France have all influenced Ballas’s literature; Iraq, Israel and France are represented in his many characters of those nationalities in his literary works.<sup>2</sup>

Three years before immigrating to Israel, Shimon Ballas worked as an assistant in the office of Ezra Menahem Daniel (1874-1952).<sup>3</sup> From the French and English newspapers he read in the office, he was thus familiar with the conditions for new immigrants in Israel before he decided to emigrate (Snir 1998, 17), a decision that he took without consulting his parents. He arranged for his journey in secret, in accordance with an Iraqi law that organized the immigration of Iraqi Jews wishing to go to Israel (Hever and Shinhav 2002, 298). Ballas later ascribed his immigration to the harassment and pressures put on Iraqi Jews after the 1948 war (Snir 2005a, 325).

During his early years in Israel, Ballas was deeply attached to his Iraqi identity and tried to hold on to it, including the language: "I have really maintained my roots and in my early years in Israel there was no any doubt in my heart that Arabic would continue to be the language of my writings" (Ballas 2009, 43-44). However, Hebrew was essential to integrate into the Israeli community after immigration and Ballas started to study the language by reading journals with the help of a dictionary and practicing the language with local Israelis.<sup>4</sup> He even began to mimic the Ashkenazi pronunciation, although he would later come to regret that decision and revert to using only the Mizrahi pronunciation (Ballas 2009, 43).

As an author, Shimon Ballas was influenced by his early childhood and adolescence in Iraq. In his novels he portrays the Iraqi society and environment, mainly the city of Baghdad. This also affects his choice of protagonists and characters, most of whom have connections to Iraq in general and to Baghdad in particular. Ballas tries through these characters to express his sense of belonging to Iraq in terms of language and culture. In his novel *Tel-Aviv Mizrah* (Tel-Aviv East) (2003), for instance, Ballas expresses nostalgia for Iraqi sights through the eyes of his protagonist Yousef Shabi: "Yousef looked at the sight of the lights coming from the fishing boats, which reminded him of the sight of the Tigris river floating south of Baghdad" (259).<sup>5</sup>

Among the main themes Ballas presents in his literary works, the question of identity and belonging shines most brightly. One of the figures that appears most often in Ballas's fiction is Haroun Soussan, the protagonist of the novel *Vehu aher* (The Other One) (Ballas 1991), who is a Jewish convert to Islam in Iraq. Soussan asks himself some questions regarding immigration: "To immigrate? Abandon everything and to leave? To cut myself off from my world and to search for absorption in a foreign society?" (21), another theme that also relates to the issue of belonging is place. In several of his literary works, Ballas raises the question of alienation and living between two worlds. Since Ballas studied at the Sorbonne, some of his works are based on characters who live in France. However, these characters, such as Hosni Mansour in the story *Aotot Stav* (Signs of Fall) (Ballas 1992)<sup>6</sup> and Andre Sural in the novel *Horef aharon* (Last Winter) (Ballas 1984), are Arabic. These characters have suffered from the sense of alienation they feel in France. Other

characters, on the other hand, do not suffer from this kind of alienation, such as Saeed in the novel *Heder na`ul* (Locked Room) (Ballas 1980),<sup>7</sup> who wanted to move to France to be free. Such characters show that Ballas was influenced by the period when he studied at the Sorbonne and indicate how Ballas's preferences for Arab culture developed. Otherwise, why would a Hebrew author in Israel, writing about figures in France, choose to include not French or Israeli but Arab characters?

Alienation in Ballas's novels can be generally divided into two terms: place alienation, which constitutes feelings of foreignness, and intellectual alienation. Ballas's feelings of foreignness resulted from the fact that he had to abandon his motherland, Iraq, of which he had memories from his childhood and youth and leave for another place that did not have connections to those memories. On the other hand, his intellectual alienation resulted from feeling like a stranger in a new culture that was in many ways different from the Iraqi cultural environment. For many Jews, Judaism was one of reasons to integrate new immigrants into Israeli society. However, for Ballas this motivation was not important. Indeed, he used to say about Judaism: "I'm a Jew by chance, it does not play that much of a role with me" (Alcalay 1996, 67). Immediately before his immigration to Israel 1951, Ballas was an active communist and the first thing that he did when he reached Israel was to join the communist party.

The appearance of characters who live between two worlds, cultures and languages in Ballas's writings is motivated by feelings of alienation and living between two worlds. It is no surprise that Ballas considers himself a bridge between Arab and Jewish culture, saying that he does not believe he is different from any other Arab, even Muslims and Christians (Snir 2005a, 327). In his words: "I don't belong to the Israeli or Jewish nationality. I'm an Israeli because I live in Israel, and I have an Israeli identity. But according to the native culture I don't find myself different from any other Arabian" (Beser 1998, 12).

The problem of identity and conflict between two worlds is not, then, only depicted in the *Tel-Aviv Mizrah* trilogy (2003); rather many of Ballas's works look at these issues. The new idea in the trilogy, however, is his exploration of Iraqi Jews who immigrated to Israel over the course of two generations in the characters that appear in the book. These characters are analysed with all their sociological, family and life problems, which are directly or indirectly connected to the dilemma of identity and belonging. This paper discusses the issues that arise when living between two cultures and two languages, the conflict between generations and the cultural conflict between east and west.

## **The Dilemma of Oriental Identity in Israel**

In the aftermath of the mass migration of Jews from Arab lands to Israel after 1948, Israel decided to deal with new immigrants in two different ways: absorption and blending the exiles (Stahl 1979, 361). Regarding the former strategy, the government at the time took responsibility for providing all the necessities of life for the newly arrived immigrants, including housing, food supplies and work opportunities. The “blending” process, on the other hand, was based on the model of the melting pot, in which the various cultural attachments of the new immigrants coming from different cultures and communities were united into one entity which would produce a new Israeli culture somewhat based on Ashkenazi European culture (Stahl 1979, 361–62). The general attitude among the Israelis in power at the time toward the Mizrahim and other new immigrant Jews from different cultural backgrounds was to try to integrate them into their new Israeli lifestyle. The clash between the Mizrahi Jews who emigrated to Israel between the 1950s and 1960s and the local cultural that had emerged in Israel by this time resulted in the Mizrahim being somewhat forced to join the new Israeli culture influenced by the Ashkenazi European stratum (Yaar and Shavit 2003, 873). This clash, accordingly, created a sort of struggle for identity and belonging among many first-generation Mizrahi Jews.

Despite the strong tendency to force the Mizrahim, including Iraqi Jews, to forget their cultural heritage and adopt the new Israeli cultural identity by means of a melting pot strategy, the plan did not entirely succeed, rather: “Over the years, it gradually became clear that ethnic groups do not lose their identity in the span of a few years and that pressure to change often causes resistance” (Stahl 1979, 362).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, many Mizrahim have tried to maintain their oriental origins. During the 1980s, for instance, they started searching for their cultural heritage and began to consider their culture as equal, at the very least, to the western culture adopted by Ashkenazi Jews (Elazar 1989, 192).

## **The Cultural Identity of First-Generation Iraqi Jews**

To begin, a distinction must be made between the first and second generations of Iraqi Jewish immigrants in Israel. According to Bensky (1991, 40), the first generation of Iraqi Jews claims to belong to the generation that consists of all the immigrants to Israel during the period of mass migration (1948-1951). Bensky considers the members of this generation to be made up of the new immigrants who reached Israel when they were older than eleven. The second generation, on the other hand, consists of Jews from Iraq who were born in Israel or emigrated to Israel when they were ten or younger. Clearly, there was some degree of dissimilarity between the environments in which each of the two generations grew up. The first generation of Iraqi Jews grew up in an oriental environment; they were quite familiar with the Arabic language and culture. On the other hand, the

second generation grew up in an Israeli environment in many ways different from that of the first generation, which included learning Hebrew in Israel schools and adapting the new Israeli lifestyle. Logically, this created differences between the senses of cultural belonging in the two groups.

In general, Iraqi Jews preserved their cultural heritage in Iraq over the years and remained integrated in Iraqi society. They used Arabic vernacular, followed Iraqi customs and traditions and even used Arabic in their religious rituals (Shiblak 2005, 34). Arabic, then, was a major factor in shaping the cultural identity of the Iraqi Jews,<sup>9</sup> all of which would indicate that first-generation Iraqi Jews were greatly influenced by Arabic culture and traditions before migrating to Israel. As if to confirm the importance of the Arabic preserved by the first generation of the Mizrahim, their language continued to occupy a position, albeit not a great one, in the literature written after emigration. Although Arabic was the language of the enemy in the eyes of many Israelis, some first-generation Iraqi authors continued writing in Arabic after migrating to Israel until their death, including Samir Naqqash (1938-2004) and Ishac Bar Moshe (1927-2003) (Snir 2005b, 104).

The first generation of Iraqi Jews in Israel expressed their adherence to their cultural heritage. As just one example, in the 1970s, a group emerged among the intellectuals and elites of Iraqi Jews that laid the foundation of the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Centre.<sup>10</sup> One of the main goals of this centre was to gather and preserve the cultural heritage of Iraqi Jews. In addition, Mizrahi Jews (including Iraqis) managed to keep in touch with their oriental identity. For example, they listened to Arab music and singers over the radio such as Umm Kulthum, an Egyptian singer who gained widespread fame in the Middle East. Moreover, with the spread of television in the early 1970s, Iraqi Jews were able to watch Arab movies and television at home (Shohat 1999, 16).

### **The Cultural Identity of Second-Generation Iraqi Jews**

Generally speaking, second generations of immigrants in new lands are less attached to the cultural identity of the first generation. This derives from the fact that the first generation is familiar with the identity elements of the land of origin, e.g. language, cultural heritage and collective experience. As the members of the second generation are almost always detached from these elements, they are more integrated and better adapted to the dominant culture in the new land (Sam, David L., Berry, John W. 2006, 80).

In this context, the years spent in school form one of the most important stages during which the identity of students is shaped. It serves as an intermediary step between childhood and youth, in which individuals move from playing to the phase of cognition and acquisition of the surrounding culture (Erikson 1962). Therefore, the educational and the cultural environment in which the members of Iraqi Jews belonging to the second generation grew up is particularly important.

In the early 1970s, the status of the Mizrahi Jews in general altered in Israeli society. This change was associated with the second generation who grew up and were educated in Israel (Meir-Glitzenstein 2002, 168–69). The children of the first generation were educated in Israeli schools like Ashkenazi Jews where the Israeli educational institution tried to force Mizrahi students to change their values and identities (Kahane 1986, 28). This was done, for instance, through the establishment's control of educational curricula during the 1950s and 1960s. The curriculum for history at that time, for instance, focused on the history of the European Jews, including the history of the Zionist movement in Europe and the Holocaust. However, the history of the Jews in Arab lands was largely ignored. Literature classes also focused on the European Jews, such as Haim N. Bialik (1873-1934) and Shalom Alekhem (1859-1916). The literature of the Mizrahim, however, was rarely taught in Israeli schools (Stahl 1979, 365).<sup>11</sup>

The first generation of Mizrahi Jews in Israel, including the Jews of Iraq, suffered from a feeling of shame about their oriental identity due to their colour of skin, their Mizrahi accents, their fondness for oriental music and their Mizrahi customs and traditions. As a result, members of second-generation Mizrahim tried to adopt the identity of the dominant Israeli stratum, because they felt ashamed of their origins (Shohat 1999, 15–16; Chetrit 2010, 153–54). The influence of the dominant western culture in Israel pushed the second generation to reject the identity of their parents. A significant number of Iraqi immigrant intellectuals, for instance, rejected their Arab roots to be closer to the mainstream of the Zionist movement (Snir 2006, 119). The change in the degree of attachment felt by most Mizrahim to the Arabic language and culture gradually declined over the years,<sup>12</sup> as seen in the abandonment of their oriental cultural heritage, on the one hand, and the acceptance of Israeli collective identity on the other (Ben-Rafael and Ben-Chaim 2006, 220). Thus the Mizrahim had to completely abandon their Mizrahi identity, including their Arabic language and culture, in order to be accepted by Israeli society and enjoy their full rights as citizens with an Israeli national identity like the Ashkenazim (Chetrit 2004, 45).

### **The Dilemma of Identity between Parents and Children in the *Tel-Aviv Mizrah* Trilogy**

The *Tel-Aviv Mizrah* trilogy (Ballas 2003) contains three novels: *Hama`bara* (*The Transit Camp*), *Tel-Aviv Mizrah* (*Tel-Aviv East*) and *Yalde hutz* (*The Outsiders*). The trilogy narrative begins in *Hama`bara*, continues largely in the Hatikva neighbourhood located in southeastern Tel-Aviv and ends in more central Tel-Aviv. The narrative follows the story of an Iraqi Jewish immigrant group across two generations (1951–1995), from their immigration to Israel to the murder of Yitzhak Rabin, and describes the absorption process of the first generation, contrasting

the integrationist tendencies and differences between the two groups. *Tel-Aviv Mizrah* also focuses on the dilemma of cultural identity between Iraqi Jewish immigrant parents and children in Israel.

The first novel in the trilogy was published in 1964, the first Hebrew novel published by an Iraqi Jew in Israel. Yousef Shabi is the protagonist of both the novel and the trilogy. Shabi, who immigrated with his mother and brother to Israel and has settled in the Orya transit camp, is among the Iraqis who gather in a meeting to choose one of the group to represent them to the authorities and demand their rights. The meeting is shut down by the police, Yousef and some other friends are arrested and they are released after a while. The novel portrays the poor conditions in the transit camps at the time and discusses the problems that new immigrants encountered after they arrived in Israel during the 1950s.

The second novel in the trilogy, *Tel-Aviv Mizrah*, was originally published in 1998. The main plot in the novel is the love story between Yousef Shabi, the protagonist of the trilogy, and Rina, an Ashkenazi Jew of Polish origin. In this part of the trilogy, Shabi works as a teacher after moving to the Hatikva neighbourhood in southern Tel Aviv, where he meets Rina. In the novel, Shimon Ballas focuses on the confusion felt by Yousef, torn between his life in the poor Hatikva neighbourhood and the world of western culture in which Rina lives, also in Tel-Aviv. In the second novel of the trilogy, Ballas continues to narrate the story of the Iraqi group that first appeared in the *Ma`bara*. The Iraqis have left the transit camp for Tel-Aviv, namely Hatikva. The poor neighbourhood has suffered from the collapse of the infrastructure there, which floods some homes with sewage, causing the inhabitants of the neighbourhood to take shelter in a nearby school. Through the main characters in the novel, the author portrays how the Israeli authorities attempt to ignore and underestimate the inhabitants of Hatikva, mainly Jews of Iraqi origin.

*Yalde hutz* (The Outsiders) is the last novel in the trilogy and, unlike the other books, was published for the first time as part of the trilogy. The novel tells the story of Doron, the son of a mixed marriage between Yousef Shabi and Rina. Ballas focuses on the dilemma of oriental identity as reflected in the contrast between Shabi and his son and describes the differences in socioeconomic status and the successful integration into Israeli society manifested in the lives, worlds and attitudes of parents and children in general.

### **The Dilemma of Identity for the First Generation in the Trilogy**

Throughout the *Tel-Aviv Mizrah* trilogy, Shimon Ballas focuses primarily on the dilemma of identity between the first and the second generations of Iraqis in Israel. The gap between oriental culture and Israeli culture is expressed through the first-generation characters like Yousef Shabi, and Esther Zamiri. These characters live in a state of confusion, torn between two identities: the oriental identity they brought from Iraq and the Israeli identity they have been exposed to over the



years since they immigrated, between their mother tongue Arabic on the one hand and the Hebrew language on the other. One of the ways in which the characters from the first generation in the trilogy express their sense of belonging to an Iraqi cultural identity is by using Arabic in many different ways in the trilogy, such as when they describe Iraqi cuisine and the characters' enjoyment of oriental music. The use of the language adds a sense of the vernacular to his first-generation protagonists.

Arabic appears in the trilogy in diverse ways, including code-switching, glossing and translation. Vernacular Arabic written in Hebrew letters is used with first-generation characters, mainly in the first and the second novels, for instance: *Ahlan beYousef, tfadal* (Ballas 2003, 29) ("Welcome Yousef, come on in"), *Dakhelak* ("enough") (52), *Wala yehemak ya abu Jamil* ("Never mind, Abu Jamil") (85), *'Aoskot* ("shut up") (128). Ballas also confirms the first-generation characters' attachment to Iraq by translating idioms and folk sayings into Hebrew, for example, *Yerbe hasdakhem veneshte 'aetzelkhem basemhot* ("May your grace rise and we will drink at your celebration") (144), *Rahoq men ha'ayn, rahoq men halev* ("out of sight out of mind") (221) and *Ahare siva malu 'aoto* ("they circumcised him at an old age") (339), a reference to the difficulty that old people often have with learning and acquiring new things. Interestingly, the first sentence in the trilogy is in Arabic written using the Hebrew script: *Maqha Alnasr lesahebehe Shlomo Hamra* ("Al-Nasr café-shop owned by Shlomo Hamra") (9). By starting the trilogy this way, the author wants to draw attention to the cultural identity of his characters and the term "Arab Jew", which appears in the text, plays an important role in doing so (Hever 2007, 266).

First-generation Iraqi Jews in Israel also often listened to Arab music on Arab radio stations, enjoying classic singers like Umm Kulthum, Abd al-Wahhab and others (Shohat 1999, 16). In the *Tel-Aviv Mizrah* trilogy, Ballas reflects on this. Umm Kulthum is still playing on the radio in coffee shops in Israel and the narrator imagines her "rolling her famous scarf between her hands" (260). Listening to Umm Kulthum even became a habit among the Iraqis, who gathered every Thursday of the first week of the month, spending the night listening to and enjoying the great singer (252). The first-generation characters' love for oriental music is a sort of tool by which the Iraqis maintain their cultural identity and struggle against the dominant Israeli identity. With the following sober words, Ballas reflects on the dilemma of identity represented by the love for eastern music and the rejection of the western music heard on the Israeli radio:

"What do we hear on the radio? All kinds of songs mean nothing to us. One might get used to speaking another language or dressing differently, but he cannot replace love with love. It is a rule. This music flows in our blood." (262).

Other famous Arab singers were also favoured by characters from the first generation like Laila Murad (204) and Fared al-Atrash (253). Another representation of oriental art in the novels is cinema, especially Egyptian cinema. Saied, the brother of Yousef Shabi in the trilogy, for instance, is keen on watching an Egyptian movie at the Adan cinema (222).

Ballas also illustrates the sense of belonging to Iraq felt by the trilogy's characters by representing the oriental customs and traditions maintained by Iraqis in Israel, which often created a sort of cultural conflict between the Iraqis as new immigrants and the local Israeli culture. This is seen, for instance, in the way that girls and boys can go for a date without their parents' approval: "A girl here can go out with whoever she wants, without any permission from her parents. But for us, it is still a hard thing to accept," (58) says Esther to her friend Meriam when discussing the way Mizrahi parents maintain traditions related to boy-girl relationships. Iraqi cuisine is also well employed by Ballas in the trilogy and helps to add to the complete picture of cultural features of identity portrayed by Ballas in *Tel-Aviv Mizrah*. Yousef's mother makes *paa-cha* (25)<sup>13</sup> and Iraqi tea is served for guests (357). Haim, one of the characters in *Hama'bara*, compares the delicious Iraqi dish "*bamia*"<sup>14</sup> to the "bad-tasting" Ashkenazi foods (78).

In addition to the multiplicity of cultural elements that characterise Iraqi and Arab culture embodied in the trilogy through the use of Arabic and oriental music, food, customs and traditions, Shimon Ballas also looks at the dilemma of identity within first and second generations in the trilogy. The trilogy contains characters who reveal their confusion about their identity, such as Yousef Shabi, the protagonist, who conducts a study about the question of identity between the two generations with oriental origins:

"And so he found himself doing in his life what he wished to prove in his thesis, which had become inconsequential over the years, that circumstances lay out a person's path and that his surroundings dictate the identity, whether he surrenders to it or not" (342).

Yousef Shabi believes that the possibility of Mizrahi identity in Israel is influenced by two forces: one rejects the Israeli identity, while the other pushes the Mizrahim toward adopting it.

One of the main characters from the first generation in the trilogy, Shaul Rishti, does not suffer from any confusion between Mizrahi and Israeli identity. Shaul believes in his Iraqi identity to his death; he writes articles and folk stories in Arabic about his memories from Iraq entitled "Baghdadi Talks" (359). As a close and old friend of Shaul, Yousef decides to publish a book that includes all of his friend's articles and stories after his sudden death from a heart attack. This attachment to the

Iraqi identity is not shared, however, by Esther Zamiri, who forgets Arabic over the years and adopts an Israeli identity:

“He wrote an interesting article about the memories of exiles, but I found it very difficult to read. I had read almost no Arabic for years, and he writes in a very sophisticated way, as if each sentence was copied from a foreign language. In general, Arabic had changed and those who do not read newspapers regularly will certainly struggle with it like I do. Yousef helped me to clarify a few mysterious sentences” (446).

Esther finds it difficult to read the introduction to the book of Shaul’s memories in Arabic, because she does not remember much Arabic vocabulary or complex structures, since she has not read Arabic for years. By adopting Hebrew and forgetting Arabic, Esther loses an essential element of Mizrahi identity, language. Yousef, who immigrated together with Esther to Israel, has not completely lose his Arabic over the years, so he helps her to understand some sentences that were difficult for her. Unlike Esther, Shabi has tried hard to maintain his Mizrahi identity, at least in terms of language. In the trilogy, Esther writes in a women’s magazine on a regular basis and appears in several television interviews. Yousef, however, does not like her articles, because they reveal her full integration into Israeli society: “Now I can understand Yousef not liking my newspaper articles. He remained loyal to himself, loyal to his identity, and I pretended to be someone I’m not” (461).

Esther’s imitation of the Israeli lifestyle and her attempts to adjust to it are not, however, entirely successful. During her military service, Esther tries to hide her oriental identity, so as to be accepted in Israeli society:

“I tried to act like them, to sing like them and to adapt my pronunciation to theirs. I tried to hide my identity and I was satisfied with my success. I remember happily receiving that astonished expression: ‘You? An Iraqi? But you do not look like one at all!’” (399–400).

Despite Esther’s success at imitating the Ashkenazim, she cannot change society’s perception towards her as Mizrahim, “It’s not like you to go wild, you are different,” (Ballas 2003, 400) says an officer when he sees Esther dancing and getting drunk at the military base. This shocks Esther: “It felt like a slap in the face” (400).

In light of this, it is clear that the characters who belong to first generation in *Tel-Aviv Mizrah* do not respond to the question of identity in the same way; some continue to maintain their identity, like Yousef Shabi and Shaul Rishti, while other characters like Esther abandon it.

## **The Second Generation, between Maintaining and Abandoning the Oriental Identity**

In the trilogy, Ballas shows how the question of language increases the gap between the first and second generations of Iraqis in Israel, with the second generation abandoning Arabic and using Hebrew while most of the first generation is more comfortable using Arabic. At some points in the novel, Hebrew serves as a sort of barrier between parents and children. When Salima's children learn Hebrew at school, for instance, she feels that the gap between herself and her children is growing because that she does not know Hebrew like they do: "her children are becoming estranged from her and when they grow up even more, what could she possibly give them? (Ballas 2003, 253). Because of her poor knowledge of Hebrew, she feels that the divide between herself and her two sons Amir and Amira is widening day by day. The fact that the language of education and everyday life is Hebrew rather than Arabic makes the second generation of Iraqis more attached to Israeli identity than to their Mizrahi identity in the trilogy. Another issue related to education is the curriculum, which is also discussed in the trilogy: "What have our children learned about the history of their parents in Iraq and Arab lands? he asks" (412).

One other reason for rejecting the Mizrahi identity is the feeling of shame about being an Arab, which has become one of the terms that embarrasses the second generation of Iraqi Jews among their friends. This explains why Doron, the son of Shabi and Rina, is not faithful to Arabic, which has strongly affected his friendships with his classmates at school. Doron describes his disappointment when his classmates see books in Arabic in his father's library. After the visit, Doron's classmates tell everyone at school that Doron's father is an "Arab" (368). Moreover, Doron wants his mother to accompany him to school and not his father, because his mother, Rina, is an Ashkenazi, and his father Yousef is Iraqi. In addition to the fact that using Arabic weakens Doron's friendships, Doron is ashamed of his oriental origin because of the negative reaction he receives when his teacher asks him about his father's origin and the class makes fun of Doron:

"You are Ashkenazi."

"According to *Halacha*, so are you. The ancestry of the son is determined by the mother!"  
Yo'el burst out laughing.

"You were never insulted for having an Iraqi dad."

"Was this at school?"

"The teacher asked everyone where his parents came from, and when I said my dad is from Iraq, they started laughing, '*Iraqi-pyjama*, '*Iraqi-pyjama*' (383).<sup>15</sup>

Shimon Ballas shows that the negotiation surrounding identity among the first-generation characters was not the same. This also holds true for the characters from the second generation. Doron rejects and feels ashamed of his Iraqi origin, while Zadok Halevy, Doron's friend who also belongs to the second generation, is proud of his oriental origin: "But he is not the type who is ashamed of his origins. On the contrary, he announces his oriental identity with pride" (451). Zadok not only feels proud of his Mizrahi identity, but also he defends it and fights for it:

"Zadok did not withdraw and every reply aroused his aggression even more [...] 'This is hypocrisy,' he slapped the table. 'On the one hand they teach young people that we are the poor and hunted and that we are a democratic country surrounded by enemies who want to destroy it, and on the other hand they screw the Arabs and the Mizrahim...'

'And the Ashkenazi left is to be blamed for all of this!' Danny protested again.

'Not only the left, but also the right,' Zadok corrected him and stood up. 'There is no difference between left and right regarding the Mizrahim and the east. Both are devoted to the doctrine of Herzl, that the Jewish state would be a dam of western civilization against the barbarity of the east'" (448).

Zadok opposes the policy of the Israeli state, which adopted Herzl's philosophy of founding a Jewish state based on the European model. Zadok blames both sides (the Israeli left and right), which have adopted racism and tried to eliminate the oriental culture of the Mizrahim.

## Conclusion

Shimon Ballas is an Iraqi-born Jew who immigrated to Israel in 1951. His trilogy *Tel-Aviv Mizrah* focuses on the dilemma of adjusting to an oriental cultural identity between first- and second-generation Iraqis in Israel. Ballas shows how the first generation of Iraqi Jews tended to be more attached to their oriental identity after the mass migration to Israel during the 1950s. Many preserved their cultural heritage, including Arabic language and traditions, oriental music and songs and Iraqi cuisine. The second generation of Iraqi Jews went to Israeli schools where Hebrew became their mother tongue and they followed a state-approved curriculum that focused mainly on the history of the Zionist movement in Europe and ignored the history of the Mizrahim. For these reasons, among others, the second generation of Iraqi Jews tended to be cut off from the two main elements associated with identity: language and education.

Ballas discusses the dilemma of identity between parents and children in *Tel-Aviv Mizrah* objectively. He touches on how identity differs from one person to another, even within the same group. The negotiation between Israeli and Mizrahi identity is a question for both the first- and second-generation Iraqis in the trilogy. The author raises an important issue of confusion between

the two identities; the second generation was not the only one who gave up their oriental identity. Some characters from the first generation, such as Esther Zamiri, also leave their oriental identity behind. On the other hand, it was not only the first generation that maintained and defended the oriental identity; some characters from the second generation, such as Zadok Halevy, adhere to their oriental identity and are even proud of it.

## Notes

1. Ballas's PhD dissertation, *Arab Literature in the Shadow of War*, discusses Arab literature written between 1948 and 1967. Ballas focuses in his dissertation on the reflection of Arab men, Arab soldiers and characters in Iraqi, Syrian and Egyptian literature. His book: (Ballas 1978) was translated into Arabic.
2. See, for instance, Ballas's description of Iraq and Baghdad in his collection of short stories (Ballas 1969) and in (Ballas 1992). France is also portrayed in his literary works, for instance (Ballas 1984).
3. Ezra Menaḥem Daniel (1874-1952) was born in Baghdad. Daniel was a wealthy Iraqi senator. He served as a member of the Administrative Council of Baghdad beginning in 1932, after the death of his father Saleh Daniel who occupied this position from 1901. See: (Stillman, Norman A., Ackerman-Lieberman, Phillip Isaac 2010).
4. It is important to note that Ballas's intention in learning Hebrew was to "narrow the gap between the Israeli public and the Arab world." See (Ballas 2009, 45).
5. Authors' translation.
6. The main character in this story is Hosni Mansour, an Egyptian living in Paris. This character is based on the autobiography of a famous Egyptian writer, Dr. Hussain Fawzy (1900-1988).
7. The plot in the novel tells the story of Saeed, a Palestinian adult, who lives with his family in a Palestinian village. Saeed feels confused and tries to adopt different ideologies in an attempt to discover himself. In the end, he decides to travel to France to find freedom.
8. Vid. the protests of second-generation Mizrahi Jews against the Israeli discrimination policy in *Wady Saleeb*, resulting in the establishment of the political movement *Ha-Pantherim Ha-Shhorim* (The Black Panthers) in 1971.
9. The Jews from Iraq spoke a Judeo-Arabic vernacular that was slightly different from the Muslims and Christians. For more information about the features of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic, see (Blau 1981; Mansour 1991).
10. This centre was founded in 1988. Its main purpose is to collect and preserve the inheritance of Iraqi Jews and to represent Iraqi Jews in Israeli society. The centre also has a museum that contains Jewish monuments from Iraq and publishes *Nehardea*, a journal of literature and

folklore of the Iraqi Jews. The centre also publishes books and volumes concerning Iraqi Jews. For more information, see (Meir-Glitzenstein 2002). See:  
<http://www.babylonjewry.org.il/new/english/nehardea/nehardea.htm>

11. The history of the Mizrahim started to be taught in Israeli schools in the 1970s with subjects like the history of Zionist movement activity in Arab lands and the migration of Jews from Arab lands and North Africa to Israel. Literary works by some famous Mizrahi Jews have also been taught, see (Stahl 1979).
12. A recent study has found a decrease in the number of second-generation Iraqi Jews who continue to maintain oriental habits and a significant increase in the percentage of those who have completely given up these habits. For more information, see Tables 29 and 30 in (Bensky et al. 1991, 233).
13. A famous Iraqi dish cooked by Jews on Shabbat and on Jewish holidays, see: (Meiri and Moreh 2006, 240).
14. A famous Iraqi and Arab dish that was also enjoyed by Jews in Iraq, see: (Meiri and Moreh 2006, 236).
15. When the Iraqis came to Israel, some of them had to go out onto the street in their pyjamas to buy goods from the shops near their houses. They were made fun of because of this.

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